Reconsidering the Authentic

Words by Leigh Biddlecome
Photography by Molly DeCoudreaux

According to the philosopher-scholar Michael Walzer, a person is considered to be “inauthentic” when she has “failed to live up to [her] principles.”

In the food world, the word “authentic” has become both a charged touchstone and a term mostly emptied of recognizable meaning. Charges of “inauthenticity” are hurled at restaurants and cafes in the course of online reviews from the masses, whilst establishments try to pre-empt criticisms by inserting “authentic” into press releases, across mission statements, and onto menus. The result is a confusing proliferation of a term that despite—or perhaps because of—its frequent use lacks a settled understanding. Like so many other buzzwords of our time connected to consumption (consider “curate” another), its use seems more often related to a desire to be seen by others as knowing the fashionable word, rather than expressing a precise meaning.

Perhaps the logical inverse of Walzer’s description—that is, authenticity means living up to a set of principles—is the first step in the search for a more elemental understanding of the concept. But what are these principles, and, in the domain of food, who gets to decide them? Perhaps more critically in San Francisco right now, how does the rise of an authenticity-obsessed culture relate to a parallel increase in wealth and racial homogeneity?

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I should admit that these questions have also evolved from the experience of moving back to the San Francisco Bay Area from Europe several years ago, after nearly a decade away, and discovering a city that seemed to be steadily flattening in every sense except topographically. A sameness in consumer culture, industry, and ethos alongside an increasing economic inequality was—simply put—disturbing. What emerges is that questions of authenticity are not just relevant to the city’s cultural history, but integral to any consideration of its growth.

Italian and Italian-American cuisine in the SFBA provide a surprisingly apt touchpoint, with their reflections of multiple waves of immigrants and the changing demographics of the region. Questions of authenticity also become particularly charged when speaking of a cuisine that has both an “assimilated” version (i.e. Italian-American) and an “original” version (experienced either in Italy, or, in restaurants outside of Italy claiming to recreate the original cuisine).

The first wave of immigrants from Italy to San Francisco arrived in the mid-19th century and built up the neighborhood near the docks, dominating the fishing industry within 50 years. Today, Little Italy draws throngs of tourists to its Italian-American red-sauce joints and to a shrinking group of old, Italian-American businesses. One of these is Liguria Bakery, occupying a corner-shop across from the edifice of Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Church. These days the bakery has cut back its production to variations on a single theme: focaccia. Founded by the current-owner Michael Soracco’s grandfather in 1911, its name references the northern Italian region where focaccia is a mainstay, and hints at San Francisco’s unique position within America as a center for immigration from the north of Italy (Chicago and New York were settled by mostly southern, rather than northern, Italians).

Liguria Bakery is spare inside: tile floors, a couple of chairs, and mostly-empty white shelves. When I walk in on a Tuesday morning, there are a few locals sitting around with Michael’s sister Mary, and their mother, Josephine, the co-owner, who preside over the counter chatting about another neighborhood business. The mom-and-pop feel and the casual, social atmosphere reminds me immediately of Italy, as does the yeasty, olive-oil fragrance coming from the back of the bakery. Looking at the menu, though, the “jalapeño and cheese” focaccia is startling, amidst the four or five other classics spelled out in white plastic letters on a black felt board (“plain,” “olive,” “onion”). The Soraccos explain that the jalapeño focaccia was an innovation for Cinco de Mayo one year, which proved to be so popular that it never left the menu. So “jalapeño,” with its very non-Italian “ñ” and domestic

Chef Michael Tusk.

cheese topping, remains unapologetically there on the menu, a subtle reference to the traditionally strong Latino influence on the culture and cuisine of San Francisco.

A different story of cross-cultural adoption can be found at Dianda's Italian-American Pastry Company in the Mission District. The bakery, on the ground floor of a beige, architecturally unremarkable building, is one of a couple of businesses that recall the neighborhood's earlier days as an Italian enclave—although today the Mission is better known for having been the heart of San Francisco's Latino culture for much of the 20th century. The neighborhood has also been the site of battles over aggressive gentrification over the last 10 years, as new residents —many with tech salaries—have displaced large numbers of the Latino community.

Dianda's tells an older story of neighborhood transition: the left display case is packed with traditional Northern Italian cookies—*biscotti*, *panforte*, and *brutti ma buoni*; and on the right, a brightly hued line of their now-famous *tres leches* cakes. On a Saturday afternoon, the animated Spanish of a long line of customers floods the space, an altogether captivating, unexpected blend of a small Italian town and Mexico City. The current trio of owners, who started out as bakers under the Dianda family and took over in 2004, are two Mexican-Americans and a self-described "Jewish guy from Brooklyn." Not a single Italian works for Dianda's anymore—a fact that might scare off the Italian purist, but otherwise strikes me as a fascinating example of a successful transfer of artisanship from one immigrant culture to another. It also happens to be patronized nearly exclusively by the neighborhood's older residents and Latino population.

But, ultimately, what to make of the "japaleño focaccia" and *tres leches* cake alongside the Italian *panforte*? What of the adoption of Mexican flavors into the Italian repertoire—and in the case of Dianda's, the adoption of an Italian business by two Mexicans and a "Jewish guy?" When considered within the American urban context, this culinary mingling strikes me as almost banal in its literal embodiment of our beloved melting pot story. For San Francisco's new, young, tech-elite demographic, however, I worry that placing cuisine within its local and historical context will get lost amidst an almost obsessive, purist's drive to find "the authentic." For this group, authenticity is based on the principle of being "true to the original," i.e. the "version from the country of origin." The average member of this demographic bases dining decisions on meticulous online research. She is likely to have enough income to have visited Italy as a tourist at least once, she seeks to replicate this memory—not some disfigured Italian-American version. Pair this with the very real phenomenon of an increasingly *un*-diverse city (and I mean this both in terms of homogeneity of mindset as well as race and class), and you end up with a culture that prizes "unadulterated" cuisine—while oblivious to the fact that the conditions that have been central to creating new culinary-culture combinations are being sucked right out from under us.

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Stuck in these demoralizing thoughts, I get in touch with two chefs who I think might offer some alternative principles for authenticity, and consequently help us develop a theory for how we might inspire the public to a different approach. I'm especially curious as to how the city's newer generation of Italian restaurants position themselves between the principles of Italian and Northern-Californian cuisines. My hunch is that these two chefs—Matthew Accarrino of SPQR and Michael Tusk of Cotogna—at the very least complicate the belief that "the more classic Italian dishes on the menu, the more authentic the restaurant."

Chef Accarrino of the "Italian-inspired," Michelin-starred SPQR comes from an Italian-American family in New Jersey, and has also spent significant time working with and visiting family members across Italy. When we first meet, amidst the bustle of prep for dinner service, he's energetic, direct, and quickly informs me that his approach to the idea of authenticity is one with

Cotogna Restaurant.

a certain skepticism, even playfulness. Many of the Italian names on the menu are intentionally framed in quotations, like his "garnet yam gnocchi with a beef and black garlic 'bolognese.'" The quotes acknowledge the Asian influence of black garlic, but he also reminds me (only half-kidding), that "you're not eating it on a square in Italy." Striking a more serious note, he explains that Italian food is deeply linked with a particular time and place—the work of generations, using almost exclusively what they had close at hand. Importing Italian ingredients to California to recreate Italian dishes would be contrary to that spirit, he believes. Instead, he would rather stray from that particular version of authenticity in order to "distill experiences and flavors into a different form." This distillation still is very much in line with Italian gastronomic philosophy—working with *materie prime* (raw ingredients) from local cheese makers, farmers, and charcutiers. Accarrino's reluctance to enter into a reductive debate on his relative authenticity (or not) refocuses the discussion.

Chef Tusk of Cotogna greets me mid-afternoon in his neighboring restaurant, Quince, with the slightly harried look of someone who's coming directly from several meetings and a lunch service. He quickly softens as the substance of our talk starts to mirror the menu of Cotogna itself: anecdotes of his formative experiences in Italy involving particular ingredients alternate with rumination on what it means to cook them within a Northern Californian context. He recalled a trip to Modena in which he was invited to dinner by a *nonna* figure who simply popped out to her backyard to pick some nettles to add to a pasta course. Admitting "a soft spot for nettles," this spurred Tusk to find a way to bring the wild nettles that grow around Fresh Run Farm onto the menu at Cotogna—currently starring in a *sformata* antipasto and the nettle *tortelli*. There is humility in his desire to go constantly "to the source" in Italy in order to learn as much as possible—but also an openness when back in his kitchen to be creative with what is at hand: "balancing innovation and tradition," as he puts it. He adds, "a dish isn't authentic just because you're copying it line for line; it's more about the essence of it. Does it *remind* you in its immediacy of that original taste experience?" So he might start with a desire to recreate the Venetian sense of being "surrounded by water" (befitting San Francisco), but instead of making a *spaghetti alle vongole*, he would recreate the sensibility of that Italian dish by using a SFBA-native shellfish paired with a house-made pasta—a move he admits came only with time, confidence, and a certain "honesty," as he quietly puts it. Concern with both the tangible (raw ingredients) as well as the more ethereal ("essences" and "taste experiences," as he says) are indicative of Tusk's sophisticated understanding of how the chef-artist might eschew the more reactionary version of the authentic in favor of principles that reference multiple traditions—in this case, from Northern California and Italy.

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If current trends of taste and demographics continue in San Francisco, it is conceivable that the spontaneous, quirky merging of various culinary cultures (of the jalapeño-focaccia variety) will cease to exist unless engineered for concept restaurants (i.e., sushi-burrito chains). And while this outcome is not on the same level as the grave, concurrent issues of evictions and displacement, it is at our own peril that we disregard our fixation on authenticity. As any employee of Facebook or Google is well aware, consumer purchasing choices betray a set of values and corresponding political beliefs. If these choices privilege authenticity in its simplistic form—favoring the "pure original"—then I believe these thought patterns are not merely unsophisticated, but when considered within the context of current demographic shifts in the city, they edge disconcertingly close to a politics of homogeneity.

All of this is on my mind as I contemplate leaving this city, which has moved further and further in a direction that troubles me in its increasing economic inequality (and, simultaneously, towards sameness in its consumer culture). In the meantime, to combat the unsettling obsession with the authentic as "fidelity to a pure original," I would encourage us to imagine a different set of principles upon which to base the term: say, fidelity to an "essence," as Chef Tusk might suggest, or fidelity to a taste memory or emotion. And when forging new territory between multiple traditions, then consider discarding the concept entirely—especially in those unlikely of circumstances when *tres leches* shares the shelf with *biscotti*.

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Caramelle with fresh run farm broccoli; Cotogna.

Meyer lemon linguini, abalone 'alfredo,' American bottarga and garlic chips, SPQR.

Left: Mushroom and root vegetable 'stufato', SPQR.
Right: Chef Matthew Accarrino, SPQR.